

## 59th DIRECTING COUNCIL

### 73rd SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

*Virtual Session, 20-24 September 2021*

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*Provisional Agenda Item 8.17-C*

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#### C. SUBREGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

##### **Introduction**

1. The technical cooperation at subregional level is supported by Resolution CD45.R6 (1), adopted by the 45th Directing Council in 2004. After adopting the resolution, subregional technical cooperation was included in budget policy to promote stronger collaboration between the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and integration processes in three subregions: Central America, the Caribbean, and South America.
2. The purpose of this document is to inform Member States about agreements and resolutions arising from integration mechanisms since the last report submitted in 2019 regarding public health-related agreements and resolutions within the framework of subregional integration processes of interest to the PAHO Governing Bodies.
3. This document also covers progress made on activities that were part of cooperation agreements between PAHO and subregional integration entities.
4. Through the signing of specific agreements and memoranda of understanding, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau currently provides technical cooperation to the subregional integration organizations mentioned below. This report shows new developments and progress made in the implementation of priority resolutions adopted by these integration bodies, as well as their relation to PAHO activities, and measures that the Organization has supported.

##### **Integration Entities in Central America**

###### *Central American Integration System (SICA)*

5. SICA is the institutional integration framework of the Central American region. It was established on 13 December 1991 under the Protocol to the Charter of the Organization of Central American States (OCAS), or Tegucigalpa Protocol, signed by
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the States of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Belize (2000) and the Dominican Republic (2013) later joined as full members.

6. SICA operates through various organs and secretariats, and PAHO participates in several activities with secretariats related to health, environment, social affairs, municipalities and communities, education, Afrodescendant populations, and indigenous populations. Most activities are jointly developed with the Executive Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of Health of Central America and the Dominican Republic (SE-COMISCA).

7. Statement on the COVID-19 pandemic “Central America united against the coronavirus” by the Heads of State and Government of Belize, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama on 12 March 2020: SICA Member States were requested to adopt necessary actions to control the pandemic, working within the framework established by PAHO and the World Health Organization (WHO) to advance measures to contain, reduce, and control COVID-19.

***Council of Ministers of Health of Central America and the Dominican Republic (COMISCA)***

8. COMISCA is a part of SICA; its purpose is to identify and prioritize subregional health issues. COMISCA normally convenes every six months and is the main subregional forum for analysis, deliberation, and presentation of proposals by the health ministers. Its current strategic plan covers the period 2018-2021, and the Health Plan for Central America and the Dominican Republic 2021-2025 (PSCARD) is under development.

9. On 1 October 2019, the Health Cooperation Strategy (ECS) was formalized between the parties, establishing work to be done by 2025. The ECS is based on the cooperation agreement between PAHO and the SICA General Secretariat signed in 1995, and the cooperation agreement with COMISCA formalized in December 2017. In 2019, PAHO opted to change the cooperation modality and reduce the subregional structure while maintaining the cooperation program for this subregion.

***Virtual Special Sessions of the Council of Ministers of Health (COMISCA)***

10. Resolution 01-2020 on the threat of COVID-19 and the regional public health response to the pandemic, adopted on 3 March 2020. This resolution called for strengthening International Health Regulations (IHR), managing the flow of information sent to PAHO on cases identified in the countries, strengthening health care systems in order to determine needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic response, and enabling procurement through the COMISCA joint negotiation mechanism or other existing mechanisms.

11. Resolution 02-2020 on the approval of the Regional Contingency Plan aimed at complementing national efforts for the prevention, containment, and treatment of COVID-19 and other rapidly spreading diseases, adopted on 19 March 2020: The resolution approves the Regional Contingency Plan for the Prevention, Containment, and Treatment of COVID-19 and other Rapidly Spreading Diseases presented by SE-COMISCA to COMISCA and instructs the Executive Secretariat of the Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America and the Dominican Republic (CEPREDENAC) and SE-COMISCA to implement the plan.

12. Resolution 03-2020 on implementation of the SICA Regional Contingency Plan for COVID-19, adopted on 4 April 2020: The action matrix was approved to implement axis 1 (“Health and risk management”) of the Regional Contingency Plan. SE-COMISCA was instructed to work with SICA technical operational bodies and strengthen the CEPREDNAC SICA COVID-19 Information and Coordination Platform.

*Council of Ministers of Health (COMISCA) Virtual Regular Meetings*

13. The 52nd Regular Meeting of COMISCA was held virtually on 25 June 2020, with Honduras assuming the *pro tempore* presidency. During this session, the COMISCA 02-2020 agreement established technical support between the Uppsala Monitoring Centre (UMC) and SE-COMISCA for the COMISCA Regional Pharmacovigilance Program, providing access to the Noti-FACEDRA adverse drug reactions platform, including COVID-19 vaccination and management of reporting to UMC. During general proceedings, a proposal was made to expand the scope of binational agreements and manage political-strategic and technical-operational meetings within the framework of the Regional Malaria Elimination Initiative in Mesoamerica (RMEI).

14. The 53rd Regular Meeting of COMISCA was held on 10 and 11 December 2020 under the *pro tempore* presidency of Nicaragua. The following resolutions were addressed at the session:

- a) COMISCA Resolution 09-2020 on the results of the 4th Regional Intersectoral Forum for the Health of Central America and the Dominican Republic “Healthy environment, climate change and health: antimicrobial resistance from a one health approach”: Proposes regional strategic guidelines in response to infectious diseases caused by multi-drug-resistant pathogens, an action framework for antimicrobial resistance surveillance, and health regulation instruments for water and sanitation, with a regional approach based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework.
- b) COMISCA Resolution 10-2020 on the Regional Study on Equity and Fertility in Adolescents (EREFA) in Central America and the Dominican Republic: Requests SE-COMISCA, along with PAHO and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), to finalize the analysis and publish the results of EREFA. In addition, it calls for the inclusion of aspects related to the impact and the consequences of COVID-19.

- c) COMISCA Resolution 11-2020 on the COMISCA Regional Mental Health Strategy: Approves the COMISCA Regional Mental Health Strategy developed with PAHO support and instructs SE-COMISCA and the Mental Health Technical Group (GTSM) to implement the strategy with the support of PAHO/WHO and other partners.
  - d) COMISCA Resolution 12-2020 on the Initiative for COVID-19 vaccine access in Central America and the Dominican Republic: Directs SE-COMISCA to develop actions based on the subregional COVID-19 vaccination strategy, including resource mobilization, legal analysis of negative impacts, a block proposal, analysis of safety issues and liability that companies wish to transfer to governments, and promotion of the Joint Negotiation mechanism as another mean of purchasing vaccines for the subregion.
15. Costa Rica assumed the COMISCA *pro tempore* presidency for the first semester of 2021. Guatemala will take over in the second semester, as Panama has prior commitments.

***Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project (MIDP)***

16. The Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project, or Mesoamerica Project, is a mechanism created by ten Mesoamerican countries (Belize, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama). Its purpose is to strengthen regional integration and promote economic and social development in the participating countries. The project was officially established by the presidents and heads of state and government at the Tenth Tuxtla Dialogue and Agreement Mechanism Summit (2008), focusing on two axes: one economic and the other social. The latter addresses public health, risk management, food safety, and housing issues, among others. Belize assumed the *pro tempore* presidency for the first semester of 2020, and Guatemala in the second semester of the year. El Salvador held the position during the first semester of 2021.

***Executive Commission of the Mesoamerica Project***

17. The Executive Commission of the Mesoamerica Project will consist of the presidential commissioners and the commissioner designated by the prime minister of Belize. The primary functions of the Executive Commission are to ensure that the objectives of the Mesoamerica Project are met, to submit proposals to the governments, and to monitor Mesoamerica Project activities. The Commission is the political and administrative arm of the Executive Directorate (DEPM).

18. Malaria elimination during the 2016-2020 period was addressed at the first Executive Commission meeting of 2020, held in San Ignacio Town (Belize) on 11 February. The DEPM is developing an operation manual for the Regional Malaria Elimination Initiative (RMEI) for Mesoamerica and the Dominican Republic. PAHO is working with the Member States on this issue in compliance with Resolution CD55.R7 (2016) (2).

19. The Road Safety Project proposal being developed by DEMP (Healthy and Safe Mobility in the Member States of the Mesoamerica Project), was addressed at the second 2020 meeting of the Executive Commission, held on 13 July. PAHO is working with the Member States on this issue and has proposed technical support for project activities.

20. Progress on binational cooperation agreements for malaria elimination in cross-border regions within the RMEI framework was highlighted at the fourth 2020 meeting of the Executive Commission, held on 4 December. PAHO is working with the Member States as technical leader in the development of bilateral agreements.

### ***Mesoamerican Public Health System (SMSP)***

21. The purpose of the Mesoamerican Public Health System (SMSP) is to respond to the main common challenges in public health and to strengthen national health systems through selected interventions and operational support provided by the Mesoamerican Institute of Public Health (IMSP). Priority has been given to work on health issues such as road safety and progress with RMEI in the Central American region, as well as support for governmental systems through the management of information on the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter issue prioritizes sharing information produced by PAHO and WHO to fight the pandemic.

22. The SMSP Ministers and Authorities Statement on COVID-19 was released on 7 April 2020. It recognized the work of the member countries and promoted joint efforts with SE-COMISCA, in addition to requiring PAHO/WHO support to combat disinformation and facilitate dissemination of official information.

### **Caribbean integration entities**

#### ***Caribbean Community (CARICOM)***

23. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM), a grouping of 20 countries (15 Member States and five Associate Members) came into being in July 1973 with the signing of the Treaty of Chaguaramas, which defines a structure consisting of organs, bodies, and institutions. The relationship between PAHO and CARICOM is defined by a memorandum of understanding signed in 1983. The PAHO Subregional Program Coordination Office for the Caribbean is the Organization's main interlocutor with CARICOM. Through its technical cooperation, PAHO supports the development and implementation of Caribbean Cooperation in Health, the functional cooperation strategy for health adopted by CARICOM Ministers of Health.

24. The CARICOM Conference of Heads of Government normally meets twice a year. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, CARICOM convened six special emergency meetings of the Conference of Heads of Government (8th to 13th) and two regular meetings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For details on the meetings, see the CARICOM website: [www.caricom.org](http://www.caricom.org).

*Conference of Heads of Government*

25. Between March 2020 and February 2021, eight regular and special meetings of the Conference of Heads of Government were held, during which several decision points and resolutions related to COVID-19 were adopted. At these meetings, the heads of government urged the following actions to be taken:

- a) Develop a shared public health policy for testing protocols, joint procurement of COVID-19-related supplies (e.g. personal protective equipment and medical devices), and more hiring of medical professionals.
- b) Increase the participation of Member States in the WHO Solidarity clinical trial.
- c) Establish a regional mechanism to provide smaller countries with access to enough vaccines to achieve herd immunity, beyond the 20% currently guaranteed by the COVAX Facility.
- d) Hold a World Summit, convened by WHO, to address equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. The summit is expected to be held as part of the WHO Facilitation Council for the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator.

*Joint meeting of the Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD) and the Council for Trade and Economic Development (COTED), Georgetown (Guyana), 19 November 2019*

26. COHSOD and COTED agreed to formally establish a working group on unhealthy food and obesogenic food environments concentrating initially on noncommunicable disease risk factors: salt, sugar, and trans fats. Representatives from ministries of health and trade from at least five Member States are included in the working group. The CARICOM Secretariat and the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) will act as technical advisors and provide administrative support for the working group, which will collaborate with other direct stakeholders from the health and commercial sectors to develop strategies, policies, and regional plans to reduce noncommunicable diseases.

*39th Meeting of the Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD), virtual meeting, 25-26 November 2020*

27. COHSOD encouraged the Member States to use PAHO/WHO tools and experiences to prepare for planning, implementation, and monitoring of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. The Council also acknowledged the European Union, CARPHA, and PAHO for facilitating initial payment for self-financed Member States.

28. There was political support at the highest level for accelerating the adoption of a regional standard on octagonal front-of-package warning labels, and necessary regulations and national laws. This includes support for the process being led by the CARICOM Regional Organisation for Standards and Quality (CROSQ) to review the CARICOM Regional Standard on specification for labelling of pre-packaged food (CRS 5:2010).

29. COHSOD requested the CARICOM Secretariat to establish a working group on human resources for health to provide recommendations and monitor the development of public policies in Caribbean countries and territories in collaboration with PAHO and other key health sector institutions. PAHO will act as secretariat of this working group and can provide direct technical cooperation through the subregional program.

### **South American integration entities**

#### ***Andean Community: Andean Health Agency-Hipólito Unanue Agreement (ORAS-CONHU)***

30. In the Andean Integration System, ORAS-CONHU acts as executive secretariat for the Meeting of Ministers of Health of the Andean Area (REMSAA). PAHO participates in these meetings as the technical advisory agency on health. An umbrella memorandum of understanding was signed between PAHO and ORAS-CONHU on 16 March 2017 and then extended in 2019. PAHO's Subregional Program for South America is the Organization's main interlocutor with ORAS-CONHU and, through its technical cooperation, supports the development and implementation of the recently approved strategic plan for health integration. The PAHO Subregional Cooperation Strategy for South America for 2019-2022 is in complete accordance with the ORAS-CONHU strategic plan for health integration for 2018-2022. REMSAA held its 38th Meeting virtually on 16 April 2020 under the *pro tempore* presidency of Chile, during which Dr. María del Carmen Calle formally assumed the position of Executive Secretary of ORAS-CONHU. The ORAS-CONHU Operating Plan and 2021 Budget were approved at the 33rd Special Meeting of Ministers of Health of the Andean Area, held on 15 December 2020.

31. Several resolutions were adopted at the 38th Meeting of REMSAA held on 16 April 2020, including the following:

- a) REMSAA Resolution XXXVIII/536 approves the Andean policy on prevention and treatment of malnutrition in children under 5 years of age.
- b) REMSAA Resolution XXXVIII/538 extends the 2017-2019 Andean plan for elimination of human rabies transmitted by dogs and control of rabies transmitted by wild species to 2020-2022.
- c) REMSAA Resolution XXXVIII/539 adopts the Andean Mental Health Policy.
- d) REMSAA Resolution XXXVIII/540 permanently establishes the Andean Health Committee for Migrants and urges efforts to implement the Health Plan for Migrants.
- e) REMSAA Resolution XXXVIII/541 establishes the Andean Committee to Tuberculosis and approves the Andean Plan to End Tuberculosis 2020-2025.
- f) REMSAA Resolution XXXVIII/542 congratulates ORAS-CONHU as the principal recipient of a grant provided by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria for implementing actions to strengthen the tuberculosis laboratory network in the Region of the Americas.

- g) Recommendation to eliminate viral hepatitis B and C following suggestions provided by the Andean Hepatitis Committee.

***Southern Common Market: Meeting of Health Ministers of MERCOSUR and Working Subgroup 11 “Health”***

32. The highest sectoral body in this area of cooperation is the Meeting of Health Ministers of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay). The rest of the South American countries are Associate States. The working subgroups are technical bodies made up of representatives of the States Parties of MERCOSUR. Their main objective is the formulation and harmonization of common regulations in MERCOSUR within each area of jurisdiction. The main purpose of Working Subgroup 11 “Health” (SGT 11) is to harmonize strategic policies linked with public health and align them with regional priorities, and to develop plans and programs of action for joint implementation.

33. An umbrella memorandum of understanding was signed between PAHO and MERCOSUR on 11 June 2015 and was renewed in 2019. New issues were included for which PAHO can provide technical cooperation. PAHO’s subregional cooperation strategy for South America for 2019-2022 is in complete accordance with the thematic areas contained in the memorandum of understanding. The 3rd Special Meeting of Ministers of Health of MERCOSUR was held on 19 February 2020 in Asunción (Paraguay) under the *pro tempore* presidency of Paraguay, and the 46th Meeting of Health Ministers was held virtually on 18 June 2020. The 47th Meeting of Health Ministers of MERCOSUR was later held virtually on 3 December 2020 under the *pro tempore* presidency of Uruguay. At the meeting, the *pro tempore* presidency was transferred to Argentina.

34. At the 3rd Special Meeting of Health Ministers of MERCOSUR and Associate States, held in Asunción (Paraguay) on 19 February 2020, the health ministers of MERCOSUR issued a statement on the epidemiological situation of dengue, measles, and COVID-19 in MERCOSUR.

35. At the 46th Regular Meeting of Health Ministers of MERCOSUR and Associate States, held by videoconference on 18 June 2020, the MERCOSUR health ministers issued a statement recognizing the role of WHO and PAHO in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Meeting also took note of the project for a network of prehospital shelters administered by MERCOSUR border sister cities for patients with mild cases of COVID-19, developed by the MERCOSUR Social Institute.

36. At the 47th Regular Meeting of Health Ministers of MERCOSUR and Associate States, held by videoconference on 3 December 2020, the MERCOSUR health ministers issued statements on the following issues:

- a) Food aid for vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic
- b) The importance of ensuring environmental and worker health during the COVID-19 pandemic

- c) Tobacco control and COVID-19
- d) The COVAX Facility

***Forum for the Progress and Integration of South America (PROSUR)***

37. PROSUR is a mechanism and space for dialogue and cooperation among all South American countries to move toward more effective integration and promote the growth, progress, and development of the South American countries. Its highest sectoral body is the Meeting of Health Ministers of PROSUR. Currently, eight South American countries have signed the forum's charter: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, and Peru. On 12 December 2019, the sectoral health plan was validated, including two working subgroups: one on active and healthy aging, and the other on digital transformation in health. In 2020, the *pro tempore* presidency of Chile convened three meetings of health ministers and four meetings of heads of state and government, producing three presidential statements. In addition, five working groups were formed on different issues: movement of people, epidemiology and data, joint purchasing, movement of goods, and international funds credits.

38. The Heads of State and Government of PROSUR held three virtual meetings: 16 March, 19 May, and 27 August 2020. At these meetings the following statements were approved:

- a) First PROSUR presidential statement, issued on 16 March 2020, on joint actions in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The statement proposes coordinating joint procurement of medical supplies through the PAHO/WHO Revolving Fund.
- b) Second PROSUR presidential statement, issued on 19 May 2020, on the implementation of joint actions to fight the coronavirus pandemic. The statement recommends an orderly, timely, and coordinated migration and repatriation process for nationals in the South American region.
- c) Third PROSUR presidential statement, issued on 27 August 2020. This statement promotes regional cooperation to achieve universal and equitable access to the future COVID-19 vaccines in South America, recognizing the role of the United Nations and PAHO/WHO in supporting the development, production, and distribution of COVID-19 treatments and vaccines.

39. At the 5th Special Meeting of Presidents of PROSUR, held virtually on 25 February 2021, the Fourth PROSUR presidential statement was approved, calling for strengthening and effective implementation of the COVAX Facility. The statement was especially addressed to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. The COVID-19 vaccine was also recognized as a global public good.

**Action by the Directing Council**

40. The Directing Council is invited to take note of this report and provide any comments it deems pertinent.

## References

1. Pan American Health Organization. Regional Program Budget Policy [Internet]. 45th Directing Council of PAHO, 56th Session of the Regional Committee of WHO for the Americas; 2004 Sep 27-Oct 1; Washington, DC. Washington, DC: PAHO; 2004 (Resolution CD45.R6) [cited 2021 Mar 31]. Available from: <https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/257/CD45.r6-e.pdf>.
2. Pan American Health Organization. Plan of action for malaria elimination 2016-2020 [Internet]. 55th Directing Council of PAHO, 68th Session of the Regional Committee of WHO for the Americas; 2016 Sep 26-30; Washington, DC. Washington, DC: PAHO; 2016 (Resolution CD55.R7) [cited 2021 Mar 31]. Available from: <https://www.paho.org/hq/dmdocuments/2016/CD55-R7-e.pdf>.

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